T. Eaton Company Store, Winnipeg

Synopsis of Significance

The arrival in 1905 of the T. Eaton Company Store ushered into Western Canada an important development in economic history. With the creation of a department store (at the time the biggest building in Winnipeg), and the addition of a mail order facility that operated out of a similarly huge building adjacent to the store, the T. Eaton Company created a commercial empire that for several generations affected Canadians' shopping habits. The placement of the store on Portage Avenue was also of significance, transforming the physical nature of Winnipeg by diverting commerce from Main Street onto Portage Avenue.

While the building is a Winnipeg landmark, its architectural character -- in a severe and utilitarian version of the Commercial Style -- is of less importance compared with the adjacent Eaton's Mail Order Building (1916) and especially to the grand and glamorous Hudson's Bay Company Store built a generation later, in 1926.

HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

A. Age

The T. Eaton Company Store was completed in 1905.

B. Person/Group

While the T. Eaton Company Store was connected with the famous Eaton family, no one from the family ran the Winnipeg operation and the headquarters for the operation was in Toronto, not Winnipeg. It may be possible with further research to identify particular managers or other employess of the store who were notable Manitobans, and whose connection to the store was significant.

C. Event

Eaton's had a social as well as economic effect on Winnipeg. In 1905, Eaton's became the first Winnipeg merchandiser to display charity boxes in their stores. In Winnipeg, Eaton's collected money for victims of the 1950 flood as well as ensuring delivery to the evacuees who had taken up residence in cottage country to escape the flood. Employees helped fill sandbags and the firm stored flood victims' furniture. Most relief agencies purchasing goods were too harried to keep good records but since most goods were purchased at either Eaton's or the Bay, their company records were accepted as definitive.

The annual Santa Claus parade, sponsored by Eaton's, was an annual event enjoyed by Winnipeggers and people from southern Manitoba for decades. The company published monthly bulletins for the newly settled farm communities. All aspects of agriculture were discussed in these journals: barnyards, sewing, child-care, gardening, plant rotation, animal husbandry, etc. Children were encouraged to join farm clubs and to assist in community work, with prizes offered for student activities. Many rural folk made Eaton's store and its restaurants the focus of day trips to Winnipeg. Also the meeting halls in the store, as well as the Grill Room, were used by ethno-cultural groups and service clubs from Winnipeg and the suburbs.

D. Historical Connection

The historical theme connected to the Eaton's store is Economic History/Tertiary Industries/Trade. A sub-heading could be mercantile establishments, and warehouses. This theme ties in with the Exchange District, although few of the structures in the Exchange District are as large as the Eaton's store on Portage Avenue. The creation of the store occurred for the same reason and at the same time as the Exchange District was experiencing its greatest growth. Eaton's store is not located far from the Exchange District, and, in 1905 terms, would have been considered as connecting with the warehouse district, just two blocks down Donald Street. Both the wholesale merchants and Eaton's were cashing in on Winnipeg's increasing function as the provisioning centre for the developing West.

Eaton's bought supplies from over 600 firms, some of which would have been situated within the Exchange. The presence of the store and mail order business stimulated the creation of a garment

industry in Winnipeg. That was evident by the effect the closing of Eaton's stores had on the garment industry in Winnipeg in 1999. The sheer size of the Eaton store made all the former mercantile establishments, built on Main Street during the early years of Winnipeg's development, out-dated. HBC, to compete with Eaton's, built its big department store further down the Avenue in 1926. In 1929, Eaton's accounted for 58 percent of all department store sales in Canada; with sales of $225 million, Eaton's enjoyed seven percent of the Canadian retail business, a share unmatched by any company in the United States. Although by that time Eaton's had stores in ten major cities in Canada, Winnipeg and Toronto were its flagship stores, and the mail order business for all of western Canada was run out of Winnipeg. Winnipeg's mail order department actually had more employees than either Toronto or Moncton. The Winnipeg retail store served as offices for buyers for western Canada, and was home to the national credit office until the late 1970s.

The economic benefit to Winnipeg, and Manitoba, of having Eaton's located here was immense. Besides the stimulation to production, there was the stimulation to the cartage industry, as goods were delivered from the City to households all over Manitoba and western Canada. To supply the downtown store, the company built warehouses, a printing plant, and a research department. The number of people employed by Eaton's, around 3000, was accompanied by a myriad of other people toiling in spin-off industries. The average wage of male retail workers was found by the Royal Commission of Price Spreads in 1933 to be highest in Manitoba, and this was definitely connected to Eaton's, the biggest employer in Manitoba of this sector of the working public.

The building and opening of the Eaton's store on Portage Avenue in 1905 had a major effect on the City of Winnipeg in that it redirected the spatial patterns of the developing city. Until this point, the commercial centre had been Main Street between City Hall and the Hudson's Bay Company retail store on the south end of Main Street. Major banks had developed in this area and two large mercantile establishments, Robinson's and Ashdown's, were located on Main Street at and near the Portage trail. The Eatons secretly acquired the property further west on the trail where the YMCA had built on Smith Street, and a new post office was to be built. The property John Craig Eaton chose was considered so far out on Portage Avenue that the only civilized installation beyond it was an athletic field. Their creation of a large mercantile establishment, mail order, powerhouse, warehouse and stables, covering an area two blocks wide and two blocks deep, caused other merchants to follow them to the Avenue. In the 1920s the HBC chose to establish their department store further down the Avenue, creating with Eaton's the bookends of the prime mercantile area of downtown Winnipeg.

PHYSICAL RESOURCE ASSESSMENT

A. Integrity

While it is mostly intact in terms of its integrity, the former Eaton's Store has seen some alterations over the years. The most significant change, made in 1927, involved the replacement of the ground floor architecture with Tyndall stone facings. All windows (963 of them) were replaced in 1989, at which time the building was cleaned and the cornice repaired.

B. Site Context

Considering only its immediate environs (i.e., not the whole of downtown, which has of course changed dramatically over the years) the former Eaton's Store sits within a context that can be said to have many of the original site qualities still intact – the street configuration is still the same and many of the neighbouring buildings are still extant (major changes have been at the corner of Smith and Portage (Newport Centre) and at Donald and Graham (Centennial Library). Otherwise buildings like the old Clarendon Hotel, Metropolitan Theatre, Somerset Building, Eaton's Mail Order Building and Holy Trinity Anglican Church are all still present.

C. Uniqueness

Style/Type

Sometimes denoted the Commercial Style (see William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects*, "Chicago and the Commercial Style," pages 1-82), the architectural expression that was used for the T. Eaton Store, was the style of choice around the turn of the twentieth century for warehouses and many large retail concerns. This kind of architecture had its genesis in the United States, especially in Chicago, during the 1880s and 1890s. There the warehouse aesthetic, which relied not on detail for its power but on size, material texture and pattern, primarily through window placement, was combined with a new technology - steel frame - that permitted architects to open large expanses of wall for windows. The resulting "style" was often referred to as Commercial and sometimes as Chicago, although the latter name more frequently identified skyscrapers.

In general the Commercial Style can be broken down into two subsets. One of these followed the example of the famous Marshall Fields Warehouse in Chicago (1885-87, Henry Hobson Richardson, architect), which used the round arch and rough stone walls typical of the Romanesque Revival to create a robust and powerful exterior of stone or brick. This expression of the Commercial Style is represented in profusion in Winnipeg's Exchange District in buildings like the Ashdown Warehouse (1895 and 1899, 167-179 Bannatyne), the Whitla Building II and Annex (1899, 1906 and 1911, 54-70 McDermot), the Gault Building and Annex (1900 and 1903, 92-100 Arthur) and the Campbell-Wilson Building (1903, 92-100 Princess).

The other subset of the Commercial Style was often more utilitarian in appearance. Walls were typically of dark brick and floor levels might be outlined in lighter stone. Regularly spaced rectangular windows were a hallmark and modest Classical Revival details were usually applied at the roof line. It was this vein of the style that in 1905 was used for the Eaton's Store (likely chosen to convey to shoppers the no-frills, no-nonsense (but also trustworthy) character of the

store's founder, Timothy Eaton). This version of the Commercial Style is found elsewhere in Winnipeg in buildings like the Travellers Building (1906, 283-285 Bannatyne), the Porter Building (1906, 165 McDermot), the Somerset Building (1906-07, east of Eaton's on Portage), the Inland Revenue Building (1908, 145 McDermot) and the Maltese Cross Building (1909, 286 McDermot). Despite their size these buildings have a more modest and certainly more austere character than their Romanesque cousins. While the Eaton's Store is the largest of the Classical subset of the Commercial Style, the adjacent Eaton's Mail Order Building, from 1916, is nearly as big and is a more elegant expression of the style.

Finally, the other example of large department store architecture in the city, the Hudson's Bay Company Store, is an important representative of another style that came to be used a generation later throughout Canada for such buildings. Eschewing both veins of the Commercial Style -- the rugged character of the Romanesque and the utilitarian expression of the modest Classical -- the architects of the new Hudson's Bay Store (1926) looked to the grandeur of Beaux-Arts Classical Revival Style, to create a grander and more glamourous building than had been attempted with either the Eaton's Store or the Mail Order Building.

Craftsmanship

The stripped down Classicism used in this warehouse context did not call for elaborate and unnecessary ornament, and so details are minimal.

Construction

As noted in the City of Winnipeg's report, the building is a hybrid, whose construction occurred at a time when old practices were still employed (compare with the Eaton's Mail Order Building with its use of reinforced concrete).

Interior

While the old Grill Room is an impressive interior space, the bulk of the building was never intended to be sumptuous or impressive – those qualities would naturally have distracted from the merchandise that was the focus for the operation.

Designer/Builder

John Woodman was the chief architect, and this was a major commission. Woodman was a fairly important architect in the city, responsible for such extant buildings as the Paris and Lindsay buildings.

Landmark

While it cannot be taken to represent the city as a whole, the former Eaton's Store is certainly in the next rank, as a well known and familiar structure.

Manitoba

Memorandum

DATE: June 27, 2001

TO: Honourable Ron Lemieux
Minister
Culture, Heritage & Tourism
118 Legislative Building

FROM: Tom Carson
Deputy Minister
Culture, Heritage and Tourism
112 Legislative Building
945-4078

SUBJECT: Recommendations to the Minister regarding designation of Eaton's Store

General Background

Since 1986 there has been a process in place for considering Provincial Designations and Municipal designations of heritage buildings. (The City of Winnipeg has its own process, which it already had in place and still uses rather than following the powers available for it under the Heritage Resources Act.) The 1986 Heritage Resources Act sets in place a public consultation process which is only commenced after the minister receives and then accepts a recommendation from the heritage council for designation of a provincial site as a heritage site.

Background On The Eaton's Building, Portage Avenue

This is the first recommendation on Provincial consideration of heritage designation since your having been given responsibility for this portfolio. The process which has been in place since 1986 has guided the Department's recommendations.

The Eaton's Building did not come to the attention of the Province for heritage consideration prior to recent consideration of the site for the True North proposal. It had been on the City of Winnipeg's Heritage Inventory, meaning that it would need to be considered by the City's Historical Buildings Committee before a demolition permit could be issued.

The Province has designated 27 buildings as heritage sites in Winnipeg, of which 13 are in the downtown and the City has listed 120.

On May 14, 2001, the Province, the City and the Federal Government announced their support for the True North Project group's private sector initiative. The Province identified a $10 million contribution from the Canada/Manitoba Infrastructure Agreement and a $3 million for urban revitalization. Shortly after the announcement, four letters were received by either the Secretary, Manitoba Heritage Council, or the Minister's office regarding the True North Project and the heritage significance of Eaton's. As a result, the Branch prepared a report to take to the Council for review.

On June 9, 2001, the Manitoba Heritage Council considered the report from the Historic Resources Branch on the Eaton's store. The Council made the following recommendation:

> **That the evaluation of the historical merit and the physical resource merit of the former Eaton's store on Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, places the building above the minimum threshold normally used to identify properties of provincial heritage significance, and that the Manitoba Heritage Council recommends that the Eaton's store should be considered for provincial heritage site designation.**

The Manitoba Heritage Council does not normally, nor did it in this instance, review condition, re-use or feasibility matters, as Council's role is advisory on the heritage merit or significance of a potential site or building.

The department has reviewed the implementation considerations and they are summarized below.

Considerations of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism

- Owner Interest:

  The Historic Resources Branch attempted to gauge the interest of the building owner. The owner of the Eaton's property (Osmington Inc.) has advised that it is not willing to have the property designated as a historic site (letter attached dated June 18, 2001).

  No properties have been designated against the will of an owner since proclamation of *The Heritage Resources Act* in 1986. It should be noted that the Eaton's retail store was evaluated to be of medium-high significance, whereas the Mail Order Building was identified in the Historic Resources Branch evaluation report as being more architecturally significant. The Mail Order Building is not being demolished.

  Since the owner has stated opposition to the designation process, and by practice the Province has not designated a building against the will of its owner, this is a major factor in our recommendation.

  There may well be a project in the future where the Department would recommend proceeding through a process against the will of an owner in the belief that the public interest outweighs the property rights of the owner. This would likely be reserved for a building with great architectural and cultural significance, strong public will, and with probable imminent re-use.

- Re-use Potential:

  When considering possible locations for the downtown campus of Red River College, Manitoba Transportation and Government Services (TGS) evaluated the Eaton's store, the Princess Street block and a site at the University of Winnipeg. The resultant TGS report, *Red River College: a case for a new campus* (April 2000) described the Eaton's building as "poorly suited for conversion to a 21st century learning centre".

  In reviewing the option of building the entertainment complex using two walls of the Eaton's store, Smith Carter Architects estimated this work to add a cost of $10 million to $12 million to the project and to extend the construction period by at least 10 months.

  A viable re-use option has not emerged in the intervening time since closure of the building.

- Condition

  The Historic Resources Branch does not have any engineering or architectural reports indicating the structural condition of the building. As a result, the building condition has been assumed not to be a factor which would disadvantage the project. It has been assumed that structural integrity is not an impediment.

- Municipal Support

  On June 7, 2001, the City of Winnipeg's Historical Buildings Committee recommended that Eaton's should be listed as a grade 2 heritage building. This is the middle range of heritage importance in the City's 3 level grading system. The Committee recommended inclusion of the exterior of the building, plus interior components: two war memorial plaques on the main floor; Grill Room,

Lobby and Manager's Dining Room on the fifth floor; original office suite on the sixth floor; and tin ceiling panels on the tenth floor. The recommendation was considered by the Standing Committee on Property and Development on June 12 and the Executive Policy Committee on June 13, and was not accepted. The issue of the heritage designation of Eaton's was considered by the full City Council on June 20, 2001 and was not accepted.

Lack of support of the local Government, normally an important factor in the Department's considerations, has been clearly enunciated.

- Public Support

There were no public requests for the review of the building for consideration as a provincial heritage site prior to the May 14, 2001 announcement regarding the True North Project. Since then four letters have been received requesting Manitoba Heritage Council formally review the building. The Council has reviewed the building. For a project with as much public discussion as this, evidence of a major public concern has not emerged to the Department.

- Other Considerations

Under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA), the federal government requires an environmental screening level of assessment as part of any financial contribution made to the True North project. Some examples of environmental effects to be considered in the assessment include air quality, groundwater, wildlife, soil, land, and historic resources.

Western Diversification will require the True North Entertainment Complex Limited Partnership, as the proponents of the project, to undertake the environmental screening assessment and prepare a report that meets the requirements of CEAA. The report must provide a conclusion on the significance of any adverse environmental effects identified and take into account required mitigation measures. Western Diversification will require public consultation, which can take the form of an open-house as a part of the environmental screening process.

Recommendations to the Minister:

The Eaton's building has been recommended as having medium-high heritage significance. However, the owner is not willing to have the property designated; the City of Winnipeg has declined to accept the Historical Buildings Committee's recommendation to designate the building; and no other viable re-use options have been identified for the Eaton's building that the Department could review.

Therefore, the Department recommends that careful heritage interpretation at the site, as part of True North's redevelopment proposal, is an acceptable alternative to designation of the actual structure.

True North has established a Heritage Advisory Committee to examine ways of interpreting the history of the T. Eaton Company Store and its Winnipeg operations. Interpretive exhibits can be an excellent means of recognizing the social and economic impact of the T. Eaton retail/mail order business at less cost than full scale preservation of the structure. Excellent company records exist to reconstruct this history. In addition, there is the potential through further discussion with the project proponents, via the Heritage Advisory Committee, to incorporate architectural elements from the existing building into the design of the new structure, such as those interior components identified by the City's Historical Buildings Committee.

I have attached a letter a letter from Winnipeg City Centre Investment Inc. wherein they state the owner's opposition to designation.

I have also attached a copy of the report made available to the Manitoba Heritage Council.

Tom Carson

Attachments

WINNIPEG CITY CENTRE INVESTMENT INC.
335 Bay Street Suite 900
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June 18, 2001

VIA FAX & MAIL

Province of Manitoba
Culture Heritage and Tourism
213 Notre Dame Avenue Main Floor
Winnipeg MB R3B 1N3

Attention: Ms Donna Dul
Secretary Manitoba Heritage Council

Dear Ms Dul:

re: ***Proposed Provincial Government historic listing of the T. Eaton company Store at 320 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg***

It is our understanding that the Province of Manitoba's Heritage Council is giving consideration to the historic listing of The T. Eaton Company's store. On behalf of the owners of the building, we would like to state the owner's opposition to any proposed historic listing of the 320 Portage Avenue building.

Should you have any questions on the above, please contact the writer.

Sincerely,

George S. Schott
President

GSS:vt

Manitoba Government
NEWS RELEASE

Manitoba

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June 28, 2001

MINISTER RELEASES
EATON'S HERITAGE REPORT
- - -
Important to Move on with
Downtown Renewal: Lemieux

Culture, Heritage and Tourism Minister Ron Lemieux today released an internal report offering advice on the question of provincial heritage designation for the former downtown Eaton's building.

"Normally, advice to a minister like this is exempt from public release, but I believe it is important to be as open as possible on this important issue for Winnipeg," he said. "I have now had an opportunity to read the report prepared by the Historic Resources Branch of my department and agree with my department's recommendation not to grant provincial heritage status for the former Eaton's building."

Lemieux noted that the Manitoba Heritage Council's recommendation, contained within the report, was in favour of historical designation. The department takes this important advice into consideration along with other significant factors in making its report to the minister, including the wishes of the property owner or owners.

"I understand that, since the Historic Resources Act came into effect in 1986, historic designation has never been granted over the wishes of the owners. As well, it is important to note that the granting of provincial historical designation is not necessarily a determining factor in the ultimate fate of a particular building," he added, noting that some buildings recommended by the Manitoba Heritage Council and accepted by the minister have been demolished and others, such as the Capitol Theatre, are slated for demolition.

- more -

"Preserving our history is a complex issue. We must strike an important balance between protecting our most precious assets as well as moving forward on promising opportunities. That's why we are preserving the old Grain Exchange facades with the new downtown Red River College campus and redeveloping the Ashdown Hardware-Big Four Sales building.

"The Eaton's building has sat idle for two years with little serious interest from investors. Sometimes you preserve what needs to be preserved. Sometimes you build anew to create a future. We're looking to the future," said Lemieux.

There are 147 buildings within the downtown area that have some form of heritage designation and since 1985 the provincial government has provided $1.4 million in support through the Designated Heritage Building Grants Program to provincially and municipally designated sites.

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NOTE: Copies of the report are available to news media in Room 29, Legislative Building.